

Community food projects win \$149,000 in grants

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With the help of the Grant Writing Assistance Program that is managed through the Laboratory's Community Programs Office and financed by Los Alamos National Security, LLC, the Delicious New Mexico project and Embudo Valley Library-Dixon Cooperative Market recently were awarded a combined \$149,000 in federal grants.

Delicious New Mexico

Despite a booming demand nationwide for healthy, locally produced food from family farms, many farmers in New Mexico and elsewhere remain too small to provide the quantity of produce needed to access wholesale markets, or they may lack the necessary resources to refrigerate, store, process, package, deliver or market their products at a wholesale scale. Enter food hubs, an exciting, emerging trend in local

and regional food entrepreneurship that provides the infrastructure and business management to navigate the tricky territory between small farmers and large buyers.

Specifically, enter Delicious New Mexico, a New Mexico-wide food branding and marketing effort that just won a \$100,000 grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to help sell produce from a proposed regional distribution center, the Northern New Mexico Food Hub. The hub will be located in Española and managed by Siete del Norte, a nonprofit community development organization. Roger Gonzales, a farmer from Mora County with experience in cooperative farming, agricultural advocacy and sustainability education, has been selected to be the hub's project manager.

"The Northern New Mexico Food Hub is a partnership between Rio Arriba County, the city of Española, Siete del Norte and Delicious New Mexico," explained Rio Arriba County Commissioner Alfredo Montoya, one of the organizers of the recent Rio Arriba Leadership Summit. "We are committed to investing directly in our local farmers and ranchers throughout the region."

The partners hope that the food hub eventually will find a permanent home in the vacant Hunter Ford facility, which is owned by the city of Española, but the former car dealership complex first will need extensive renovations. In the meantime, Northern New Mexico College's Sostenga Commercial Kitchen will serve as the hub's temporary Española home.

"If all goes as planned," Siete del Norte President Todd Lopez said, "the Northern New Mexico Food Hub should be in operation by spring 2015, especially since it builds on existing agricultural infrastructures such as the Española Farmers' Market."

Agriculture has been a way of life in northern New Mexico for a long time. "Known as the historic *Breadbasket of El Norte*, Española Valley is the perfect location for a regional food hub," said Rio Arriba County Commissioner Barney Trujillo.

Embudo Valley Library-Dixon Cooperative Market

The Embudo Valley Library and the Dixon Cooperative Market received a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Business Enterprise Grant for \$49,000, which will move the market a step closer to its goal of becoming a full-service grocery store for the Dixon-Embudo-Rinconada area residents as well as stimulate local agricultural production.

"As a co-op, the market refers to its shareholders as members," store manager Nelson Rhodes said. "We invite customers to become members, and we hold membership drives. But the members really are owners because they elect a board during an annual election, and the board acts as an owner would by setting policy and supervising employees."

Residents of the Dixon-Embudo-Rinconada area seem to feel that the co-op does indeed belong to them, regardless of whether or not they are official members. "When the co-op first started, I was told by other cooperatives that we could expect a lot of volunteer participation during our first year," Rhodes noted, "but that the enthusiasm would drop off and that we would be forced to hire a large staff to cover all the tasks the volunteers accomplished. More than nine years later our volunteer staff actually is as large, if not larger, than it was at the beginning."

Because the Embudo Valley Library is located in an incorporated village and is not financed through tax dollars, it depends on raising funds from foundations, local donors

and other sources, such as renting a library-owned adobe building adjacent to the library to the co-op. In this way, the co-op's success directly supports library operations. The market also tries to keep as much money in the community as it can by purchasing as many locally produced products and produce as feasible. "The members (owners) of the co-op aren't interested in posting large profits," Rhodes explained. "They would rather see the overhead met and prices kept low."

Even so, after opening its doors in June 2005 with two full-time employees, the Dixon Cooperative Market's gross sales increased by 60 percent from \$399,732 to \$661,508 during the 2006 to 2013 period, and it now employs three full-time and five part-time staff.

The library was able to expand the co-op's physical space to 2,500 square feet in 2012, and this year's \$49,000 award will allow the market to renovate its delicatessen area and improve cold storage.

To learn more about the Grant Writing Assistance Program that helped procure the \$100,000 and \$49,000 awards, see *Community Connections'* [Grant writing assistance available to small businesses, nonprofits and K-20 STEM education programs](#) story published in this year's May issue.

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